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## HOW TO EVALUATE CULTURAL AUTHENTICITY AND STEREOTYPICAL GENERALIZATIONS THAT EXIST IN ASIAN AMERICAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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### INTRODUCTION

In this presentation, I will talk about how to evaluate cultural authenticity and stereotypical generalizations in Asian American children's books by using the guiding principles created by Belinda Louie (2006). As a teacher educator, I teach literacy education to preservice teachers at a university. I discuss daily cultural authenticity issues with my students when we read multicultural picture books. However, since many of you are librarians, our situations and needs are a little different. In this presentation, first, I want to clarify the definitions of multicultural literature, then, clarify the term: cultural authenticity. After that, I will describe Louie's guiding principles. Then, I will explore cultural authenticity and stereotypical generalizations of five Asian American children's picture books that I selected for this presentation.

### DEFINITIONS OF MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE

Many authors and researchers tend to define the term "multicultural literature" in their own ways. A single definition has not been established yet. For instance, Yokota (1993) suggested that multicultural literature represents any distinctive cultural groups. I interpreted that her definition includes the Anglo-Saxon culture in it. Stood-Hill and Amspaugh-Corson (2004) also includes the Anglo-Saxon culture into their definition in *Children's Literature: Discovery for a Lifetime*. However, in *Children's Books in Children's Hands*, Temple, Martinez, and Yokota (2010) state that "multicultural literature as works that reflect the multitude of cultural groups within the United States. ...we will focus on literature that reflects ethnic and regional groups whose cultures historically have been less represented than European cultures" (p. 108). Yokota's current perspective of multicultural literature may have changed since the Anglo-Saxon culture was excluded from this definition.

Let's explore another definition. Harris (1992) defined that multicultural literature focuses on people of color (e.g., African, Asian, Hispanic, and Native American), on religious minorities (e.g., Amish and Jewish), on regional cultures (e.g., Appalachian and Cajun), on the disabled (e.g., physical and mental) and on the aged. In her definition, the Anglo-Saxon culture was not mentioned at all. Take a look at the next example! Norton clearly excluded the Anglo-Saxon culture from her definition. Multicultural literature is about various minority ethnic groups that are culturally and socially different from the white Anglo-Saxon majority in the United States (Norton, 1991, Norton & Norton, 2010). Au (1993) added issues of a gender to Harris's definition. Almerico, Barron, & Silverman (2008) collected the definitions of multicultural literature from eight college-level children's literature texts as part of their research study, discovering that many authors and researchers tend to exclude the Anglo-Saxon culture from their definitions. After I analyzed several definitions, here is my own definition of multicultural literature: Multicultural literature represents any differences (e.g., races, ethnic backgrounds, both ethnic and regional cultures, genders, ages, sexual orientations, religions, beliefs, philosophies, physical and mental capabilities, and socio-economic differences) available in the world. My definition was influenced by D'Souza's perspective of cultural relativism. According to D'Souza (1995), no culture is either superior or inferior; each culture is simply different.

## PARALLEL CULTURES

When we analyze multicultural issues, we often encounter the term “minority.” However, this term includes negative connotations. Therefore, some authors and researchers tend to use the term “parallel cultures” to minority cultures. This term was initially used by Virginia Hamilton (1993, 2001), who was the first African American author awarded the Newberry Medal in 1974.

Cultural Authenticity in Multicultural Literature

Next, I would like to share with you different definitions and perspectives of cultural authenticity. Short and Fox (2003) published *Stories Matter: The Complexity of Cultural Authenticity in Children's Literature*. Here are some of the perspectives and definitions of cultural authenticity I found in the book. Bishop (1992) maintained that cultural insiders can write culturally authentic literature about ethnic experiences, while others counter that through imagination. Gates (1992) further argued that racial, ethnic, religious, and gender identities do not always ensure that writers accurately portray their ‘in-group’ culture. Therefore, it was possible for ‘outsiders’ of a group to write sympathetic and historically accurate stories. Harris (1996) contended that it is authorial arrogance of some Caucasian American writers write about outside of their culture. Again, Yokota (1993) offered a less controversial definition. If writers do not have particular experiences to the objective culture, they can conduct exhaustive research in order to attain cultural authenticity (Yokota, 1993). I agree with this perspective; however, her current definition of multicultural literature has changed. Therefore, she may have a different perspective regarding cultural authenticity.

Regardless of authors’ backgrounds, everyone should be able to write culturally authentic literature if they conduct exhaustive research. If so, from my perspective, we readers can also evaluate cultural issues and quality of books, by using some effective guiding principles when we read multicultural books. That is the focus of my presentation.

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

As readers, teachers, and librarians, part of our responsibility is to develop critical eyes when we evaluate literary works. However, many readers tend to avoid this task if they have to evaluate multicultural literature because they are not familiar with cultural issues in stories. However, by utilizing some effective guiding tools, there are ways to improve our critical eyes. Here are seven guiding principles suggested by Belinda Louie (2006):

- 1) Assess the story’s perspective.
- 2) Realize cultural differences.
- 3) Realize characters’ motives and reactions.
- 4) Identify values.
- 5) Relate self to the text.
- 6) Use variants of the same story.
- 7) Talk, write, and respond.

The first guiding principle is to assess the story’s perspective. When we evaluate a story by using this principle, we should focus on whether a story is celebrated or exploited. For example, if a story is about Japanese Americans who were sent to an interment camp during World War II, the story should teach readers about the unfair treatments of Japanese Americans by the U. S. Government. However, if a story hides this fact or does not even mention unfair treatments, we should suspect the story is probably not accurate or culturally authentic.

The second principle is to realize cultural differences because people in different cultural groups often act differently. For example, many American children raise their hands when they have questions in class, even though a teacher is still explaining in class. However, in a different culture, students listen while a teacher explains. Students ask questions after a teacher finishes the instruction or when a teacher finally encourages them to ask questions. If readers encounter this type of difference when they read a multicultural story, they may get confused; however, this confusion often illustrates cultural differences in the story.

The third principle is to realize characters' motives and reactions. People in different cultures often think and value things differently. For example, in some countries, women still believe that getting married and being a good wife are their only life options or even a privilege for them. In some countries, women are still not expected to get higher education. If readers encounter these motives and reactions from a story character, they will perceive differences. However, these characteristics often inform readers of cultural differences.

Exploring conflict resolution strategies often provides readers with a clue in order to identify values of a story character, which is the Guiding Principle 4. When we have misunderstandings, we often have discussions in order to minimize misunderstandings. However, in some cultures, people often refrain from or avoid direct contacts with the person until they recognize the cause of misunderstandings. These differences in approach are often culturally related.

Now, let me explain the Guiding Principle 5. Many readers mentally question an author and story characters while reading a story. They attempt to relate themselves to a text. They compare and contrast similarities and differences between themselves and the events in a story. Some readers prefer to keep talking, writing a journal, and responding to an author or a story character, which is the Guiding Principle 7. These natural behaviors often help readers examine cultural differences.

Finally, let me go back to the Guiding Principle 6. Readers use variants of same stories or stories with same themes or topics. They can compare and contrast books with same or similar topics and themes. For example, they may compare and contrast *The Three Little Pigs* original story and *The True Story of The Three Little Pigs* by Jon Scieszka (1996). Another example is comparing and contrasting the original Cinderella story and a Chinese or Korean variant. The findings from the Guiding Principle 6 will help readers evaluate cultural authenticities and stereotypical generalizations.

## **EXAMINING ASIAN AMERICAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS**

Now, let me introduce to you five Asian American children's picture books that I selected for this presentation. They are all historical fiction. I examined these 5 books by using the seven guiding principles.

*My Freedom Trip* by Frances Park and Ginger Park (1998) is a story about a child who escaped from North Korea to South Korea. The authors tell how a native-born North Korean girl, Soo, crossed the border with Mr. Ham, a gentle guide. After her father left for South Korea, he sent Mr. Han to Soo and her mother. As they had to avoid being caught by soldiers, however, only one of them could go with him at a time. When Soo and the guide came closer to the border, they were caught by a soldier. However, the soldier surprisingly allowed Soo to cross the border by herself. After she reunited with her father, the Korean War began. Soo did not see her mother any more because her mother had to remain in North Korea.

Let's explore some of the quotes.

Many years ago, when I was a little school girl in Korea, soldiers invaded my country. The soldiers drew a big line that divided Korea into two countries, North Korea and South Korea. In North Korea we could no longer speak our minds, or come and go as we pleased. We lost our freedom.  
(Park & Park, 1998, unpagged)

But one by one my classmates had been missing from school. First, Eumi, then Eunook then Miyook. My best friends! They (My best friends) had left their homes in the middle of the night to cross the border to the freedom land.  
(Park & Park, 1998, unpagged)

Probably, some of you feel or even are speculating a kind of stereotypical generalization about North Korea like North Korea is Communist when you read these two quotes. However, that is a good place to explore the accuracy of information. Please take a look at the next quote.

“*Apa,*” I wailed, do not go! My father stroked my hair. His fingers were trembling. Soon, very soon, Mr. Han will return for you, Soo. And he will take you on your freedom trip. Then it will be your mother's turn” (Park & Park, 1998, unpagged).

Although this book is written for children, it sounds very serious and dangerous. You can clearly assess the perspective of this story through this dialogue.  
Let's go to the next two quotes. When they were caught by the soldier...

“No one is allowed to cross the river! the soldier shouted. I beg you, let the child go, Mr. Han continued to plead. “She has come a long way without sleep” (Park & Park, 1998, unpagged).

“After a long, silent spell, the soldier lowered his weapon. He looked away from me. I heard him whisper, Go quickly, child” (Park & Park, 1998, unpagged).

You can certainly recognize each character's motive and reaction. You can also identify each character's personal value. Although you do not have any personal experience, you can still relate to this story as someone's father, mother, and child. These are great places to explore when we read multicultural stories. Let's go to the next story.

Another war-related story is *A Song for Cambodia* by Michelle Lord (2008). Arn was a boy who was separated from his family and sent to a work camp because of the Pol Pot regime. When Vietnam invaded Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge forced children in the camp to fight against Vietnam. Then, Arn ran away to the jungle but saved himself. After that, he was adopted by Reverend Peter Pond, a volunteer worker from the U.S., and he brought Arn to the U. S. However, Arn still could not forget about his lost family and his country. So, he decided to return to Cambodia in order to restore and rebuild the devastated culture and tradition.

Let's take a look at the next two quotes.

“The soldiers separated Arn and his family to go to different camps....Arn clutched his mother, but soldiers forced them apart. She cried out for her children, then was gone. Arn would never hear her voice again” (Lord, 2008, unpagged).

“Arn worked in the rice paddies from sunrise to midnight....His bare feet blistered and his belly bulged, even though it was always empty....If they were lucky, the children caught dragonflies, beetles, or grubs to eat” (Lord, 2008, unpagged).

Again, this book was written for children; however, you can recognize the cruelty of the war. Through reading these two quotes, you can perceive that the author tries to provide readers with more accurate information. You can easily assess the perspective of this story. Let’s take a look at the next quote. Arn survived the camp because he learned how to play the khim, a traditional musical instrument in Cambodia. However, this is what happened after that.

“Soon after Arn and the others learned to play, a soldier gathered the teacher and all but the two best khim players. The group marched to the sweet-smelling orange groves, and the soldier returned alone” (Lord, 2008, unpagged).

The soldier killed them, but the author avoided using the word “killing.” However, again, many of you can assess the perspective of this story “the cruelty of the war” clearly... Let’s go to the next....

“When he was about twelve years old, South Vietnam invaded Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge soldiers did not want to fight the Vietnamese. Instead, they (the Khmer Rouge) sent Arn and other boys to fight at the border” (Lord, 2008, unpagged).

Again, it is totally wrong. It is an injustice. However, is it only your stereotypical generalization about wars? Probably not! In this way, you can assess the perspective of this story. After Arn was adopted by Reverend Pond, he regained his life, but he makes a big decision. Please read the next quote.

“Over the years Arn’s nightmare transformed into a dream—a dream of helping his homeland. With his heart once again full of sweet sounds, Arn vowed to return to his country of sugar palms, whispering grass, and bright sunshine to help others with his music” (Lord, 2008, unpagged).

When you read this portion, you can recognize his motives, reactions and identify personal values as a Cambodian. Let’s go to the next story.

*Ruby’s Wish* by Frederick Lipp (2008) is a story about a Chinese girl, who grew up in a large wealthy family in traditional China. She became the first female university student in China. Since Ruby’s grandfather had several wives, he also had many children and grandchildren. He hired a teacher. The teacher taught all of his grandchildren at home and Ruby also got this privilege. However, all girls had to fulfill their household duties as girls, so many girls gave up studying, but only Ruby continued to study with her male cousins. One day, in the poem, Ruby expressed her dissatisfaction to be born as a girl in this house. However, this poem got her grandfather’s attention, and she had a chance to express to him her desire to go to university. Let’s take a look at the next three quotes.

...when many men left to join the Gold Rush there and few came back again...he (Ruby’s grandfather) came back very rich. And he did what rich men did in old China: he married many wives. His wives had many sons, and these sons also had many wives... (Lipp, 2008, unpagged)

...”a little girl that everyone called Ruby, because she loved the color red. In China, red is the color of celebration...Ruby insisted on wearing red every day” (Lipp, 2008, unpagued).

“Ruby’s grandfather hired a teacher.... Any grandchild who wanted to learn could join the classes. This was unusual in China in those days, when most girls were never taught to read and write” (Lipp, 2008).

I am sure that you can recognize culturally related information (Guiding Principle 2: cultural differences). When you find these differences, here are the places to explore and evaluate the accuracy of cultural information in the story.

“Alas, bad luck to be born a girl; worse luck to be born into this house where only boys are cared for” (Lipp, 2008, unpagued).

When you read this quote, I am sure that many of you can perceive the gender inequity issue in old China. However, is this information whether culturally authentic or stereotypical? Here is the place to explore the accuracy of information. Let’s go to the next quote.

“You know, you are very lucky. A daughter of this house can marry any man.” “I know, Grandfather,” said Ruby, “but I’d much rather go to university” (Lipp, 2008, unpagued).

Now, you can also perceive Ruby’s motives and values through this quote. This is where to explore the accuracy of information. Let’s go to the next books.

Both *Elephants of the Tsunami* by Jana Laíz (2005) and *Selvakumar Knew Better* by Virginia Kroll (2006) tell how animals saved human beings when a tsunami hit villages. Since the topic of these books is a natural disaster, a tsunami, let’s use the Guiding Principle 6 when we compare and contrast two books with the same topic. The setting of *Elephants of the Tsunami* is Thailand. Teng Deng, Jen Di, and their six friends are elephants. Their job is to give tourists rides. However, when the tsunami hit Thailand in 2004, they perceived something wrong. Then, they lifted people, put them on their shoulders, and took them to the top of the hill. As a result, they saved themselves and also approximately 50 people’s lives. It is an amazing story!

*Selvakumar Knew Better* is also the story of the tsunami that hit India in 2004. Selvakumar is a dog. Dinakaran is a seven-year-old boy. When Selvakumar perceived a tsunami, he tried to inform people of this approaching danger; however, no one paid attention to him. However, Selvakumar never gives up and keeps barking, howling, and nipping at Dinakaran’s heels. Finally, Dinakaran understands the approaching danger through Selvakumar’s reactions. In this way, Selvakumar could successfully bring back Dinakaran to his family. Let’s explore some of the quotes.

From *Elephants of the Tsunami*

Too soon, the growling rumble was back, more powerful than before. Teng Deng and Jen Di’s mysterious inner senses warned them that danger was on its way.... Their keepers tried to calm them, but Teng Deng and Jen Di could not be reassured. Suddenly, Teng Deng made a decision. He knew just what to do...HE RAN!

(Laíz, 2005, unpagued)

From *Selvakumar Knew Better*

“Selvakumar nipped at Dinakaran’s heels, but the boy wouldn’t budge... He grabbed Dinakaran’s shirts in his teeth... With all his strength, he (Selvakumar) dragged Dinakaran’s back outside.... Finally, the boy (Dinakaran) understood” (Kroll, 2006, unpagued).

These are two different stories, and they are two different animals, but both animals reacted very similarly. These similarities often indicate the accuracy of information. Very interesting! Let's explore another quote!

From *Elephants of the Tsunami*

"When they reached the top of the highest hill, the elephants stopped. Everyone turned towards the water" (Laíz, 2005, unpagged).

From *Selvakumar Knew Better*

"Dinakaran wanted to stop, but Selvakumar knew better. He (Selvakumar) nudged Dinakaran's hand, and together they continued higher up the hill. Finally, they turned and looked down toward the shore" (Kroll, 2006, unpagged).

Again, I am sure that you could find many similarities between the two different stories. This is one effective technique for exploring multicultural stories in order to evaluate cultural authenticity and stereotypical generalizations.

## **FINAL THOUGHTS**

As librarians, you may not be interested in teaching students how to evaluate the accuracy and authenticity of multicultural children's picture books. However, as part of your job, you will be required to select and purchase many quality multicultural books for readers. Although our roles and responsibilities are different, I consider basic rules for us are still same or at least similar.

There are three basic rules you can probably use when you select multicultural stories.

Rule Number 1 is to read a story critically. Focus on literary elements and read critically in order to draw your own conclusions.

Rule Number 2 is to read reflectively. Try to connect with your own experiences. That means to relate yourself to a text. This is one of the seven guiding principles that I discussed (Guiding Principle 5). Using the guiding principles helps you minimize your subjective interpretations and stereotypical generalizations. Once reflective reading is done, it is always best to consider how your understanding and interpretations fit into the real world.

Rule Number 3 is always to explore both similarities and differences in cultures and environments. Trust me. You will find many similarities and differences in stories. Then, keep talking, writing, and responding (Guiding Principle 7) by using variants (Guiding Principle 6, different version of stories). As you read critically and reflect on what you are reading, you will begin to recognize more insightful information from stories.

Thank you very much for participating in my presentation today. I hope that you enjoy the rest of the conference.



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